

AHEADシリーズ

# 終わりの クロニクル DC

著●川上稔  
イラスト●さとやす(TENKY)







—Everyone.  
Let us go  
Without forgetting what is important.





## Title: #8's Daily Illustrated Diary

---



The world might just meet an early end today.

But it is the Christmas season and I have determined that is why everyone is very busy.

In the middle of it all, Ooshiro-sama ~~will not shut up about~~ is insisting that we celebrate, so we are throwing a party even if just for show.

When I showed him the cake, he was worried it was the same as Heo-sama's, but I explained to him that Heo-sama took hers with her.

Yes, our cake is not the same as Heo-sama's. It was the spare for it, but it was not the same exact one.

When he heard that, Ooshiro-sama ~~seemed oddly reluctant~~ rejoiced, so I grabbed his collar and he heartily dug into the cake. Unfortunately, I forgot to prepare a drink.

I will make sure to rectify that in the future.



## Interlude

### “The Usual”



I am always  
Always  
Wishing for this

---

•

The pale blue expanse of the sky contained clouds that looked drawn on with a brush.

It was the winter sky and the sun shined down from its late morning height.

A train to Tokyo traveled down the Chuo Line.

It left the station building that contained a banner for a 2005 Christmas sale and it continued east.

The train picked up speed as it cut through the city that was enjoying its year-end festival.

It was midday on Christmas.

•

“Christmas, huh?”

A voice spoke in the Tokyo-bound train.

It came from the center of the long seat halfway down the nearly empty front car.

“Look, Shinjou-kun. An IAI food cart bus is having a Christmas sale in front of Kunitachi Station.”

“Eh? Where, where, Sayama-kun?”

“There.”

Sayama in his suit pointed out the window and Shinjou in her orange jacket tried to peer out.

“Oh, you’re right! They’re doing something suspiciously lively!”

“Yes, they are. Look over there. There is even a life-size Santa doll.”

“Oh, yeah. The Santa doll is naked and hanging upside down with a sign saying, ‘My Peter-class hard luck will protect you



from Satan!' ...That can't be right!!"

"Ha ha ha. It is within the margin of error, so there is nothing to worry about."

"Really?" said Shinjou while Sayama laughed and looked to the station as it grew more distant.

They were moving east. As the midday sun shined on the Chuo Line to Tokyo, their train was as empty as one would expect of a rapid-service train.

They had an important "job" that night.

Every UCAT would be working together and they had the central role, so they had to gather at Mitaka where a base had already been set up.

They were scheduled to meet at three in the afternoon and Shinjou checked the current time on her watch.

"One o'clock. Even with just rapid-service, we'll still arrive in Mitaka a little early, Sayama-kun. But Ooshiro-san said to take things easy before this big job."

"There is something we could do, Shinjou-kun."

Shinjou nodded, thought for a moment, and spoke up with some regret in her voice.

"Yes. If possible, I would have wanted to relax together some more."

"Yes," replied Sayama as he lightly crossed his arms. "I understand just how you feel. So in the short time until Mitaka...we can flirt together."

"...I had a feeling you would say that."

Hearing that, Sayama turned around.

Shinjou had her hair tied back behind her head and she wore a winter jacket over a white dress.

She was also glaring at him.

“Um? You do know that the world is in real danger right now, don’t you?”

“Yes, I am well aware. But...is there a law saying we are not allowed to flirt when the world is in danger?”

Shinjou groaned but finally raised a finger.

“Um,” she began. “There isn’t a law saying we have to flirt either.”

“Yes, but...we are allowed freedom of expression.”

“Kh,” she groaned again.

But then she muttered “I won’t let him win this” under her breath.

“Wh-what exactly were you planning for this flirting?”

Sayama thought on that question. What exactly was this “flirting” he was thinking of? With Baku mimicking him from his head, Sayama held his hands in empty air like a conductor and made an additional pose as he answered.

“Flirt! Ing!!”

“Wh-what was that weird shout and transformation pose for!?”

“Oh? That was not enough to understand, Shinjou-kun!?”

Sayama continued his explanation while obviously surprised that his pose had not gotten through to her.

“In other words, Sayama Mikoto can use his words alone to flirt with you in only 0.00002 seconds!”

“Oh? Then if I close off your windpipe so you can’t speak, you can’t get weird?”

“Ha ha ha. Getting violent again, I see. But that too is lovely... Flirt! Ing!”

She strangled him.

After ten seconds, he went limp and she let go.

“Honestly.”

She sat back down next to him and rested her head in her hand. She was still glancing over at him.

“This really has been an awful day from the beginning.”

“Hm? From the beginning?”

“Yes, the awfulness began in the morning.”

When she glared at him, he and Baku both tilted their heads.

“This morning? But you seemed quite happy when the sun came up.”

“Waaaah!! By morning I meant when we woke up!!”

She strangled him again and shook him.

*...Oh, no. This is going to leave a mark on my neck. And if this continues much longer and I die here, Shinjou-kun would become a criminal.*

*Killing Sayama Mikoto is a greater crime than destroying the entire universe.*

*If she did that, she would be imprisoned until the end of the world, but if I am going to be killed by anyone, it should be Shinjou-kun. Still, I never like to waste a good opportunity, so maybe I could frame the old man or Izumo to get them executed. But then if neither of them was caught, Shinjou-kun would gain a criminal record.*

*And if that happened, she would have to have her fingers examined to take her fingerprints.*

*...I cannot let someone other than me do that to her!*

Therefore...

“Sh-Shinjou-kun, calm down! No matter the reason, I cannot allow someone other than me to examine your \_\_\_!”

“...Have you gone insane?”

“Ha ha ha. What are you talking about?”

Sayama laughed off Shinjou’s needless worries.

“Yes, feel free to put whatever body part you want in that ‘\_\_\_’. And something adventurous would be nice, Shinjou-kun!”

Shinjou smiled a little.

*...Good. She seems to understand now.*

Then she nodded a few times and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“How about you die?”

“No, Shinjou-kun, let us set aside such trivial matters and prepare the ink and inkstone.”

“What are you trying to do!?”

Shinjou panicked, stood from her seat to escape, and held her skirt down.

“B-besides, right now...I’m a boy!”

That line received a certain reaction.

There were very few people on the train already, but it grew completely silent now.

“...Ah.”

Shinjou seemed to have realized what her statement plus her current location meant. She looked down at her skirt, looked around, and blushed.

“U-um...well, uh...”

Shinjou was at a loss for words, so Sayama decided he needed to say something to help her out.



“Shinjou-kun!” He stood up. “I do not mind in the slightest that you are a boy, Shinjou-kun!!”

“Nwaah! You idiot!!”

“There is no need to be shy! Now, leap into my chest as the boy you are, Shinjou-kun!”

She leaped into his chest knee-first.

She heard his ribs creaking, but he seemed satisfied that she had complied.

“Gwoh! Sh-Shinjou-kun! How passionate! How manly!!”

“Sh-shut up. Why do you feel the need to destroy my position in society!?”

“A butt god has no need for a position in lowly human society, Shinjou-kun. The only place you need is in the absolute physical laws of the Sayama Universe.”

He placed an arm around her shoulders from the side and she glared back at him.

She tilted her head with a look of pure displeasure.

“I guess I’ll ask... How do things work in the Sayama Universe?”

He immediately answered.

“It has recently been introduced to the wonders of the video camera. And a digital one at that.”

“What kind of universe is that!? And don’t make it sound like you aren’t involved!”

She suddenly stopped speaking there.

He could see her tilting her head and frowning.

“What is it?”

“Well... You mentioning the video camera reminded me of

something,” she said. “Um, I’ve never actually seen you swap out the tape.”

“What are you talking about? It is all being backed up multiple times to an online distributed file storage system using the computer hidden in the ceiling. Each individual piece is useless, but my own personal software and password can transform them into a video. ...Yes, computers around the world are overflowing with you right now, Shinjou-kun.”

He had assumed she would have some kind of reaction, but when he looked to her face in front of his chest...

“?”

She simply tilted her head as if she did not understand what he had said.

He tilted his head in the same way.

“Do you have some kind of question about the grand Shinjou-kun World Domination Project I just described?”

“Well...” She frowned. “You can record video on computers?”

“\_\_\_\_\_”

He fell silent, so she tilted her head further.

“Aren’t videos recorded on tapes? I know a little bit about this, you know. They say Beta is the best so it’ll definitely survive. Isn’t that right?”

“It would seem I need to explain to you how Kashima-kun’s videos work. Not to mention what VHS is.”

“Eh? Doesn’t Kashima-san’s camera have a tape recorder built inside it? I thought it was amazing that it didn’t make a bunch of noise. And what’s VHS? Some kind of vaccine?”

Sayama decided in his heart that, when they got back home, he would explain this all to her while recording her.

*If she does not know what VHS is, I will have to have S with her V in a very H way. In fact, the cabinet meeting in my head is about to vote on the matter. No objections! Thank you. Thank you, VHS.*

*...You are a treasure of Japan!*

"Sayama-kun? Sayama-kun? What are you muttering about and what are you looking at? How about you die?"

"Oh, sorry, Shinjou-kun. I am fine. Just fine."

"Really?"

"Yes," said Sayama while watching the midday city scenery as the train ran along an elevated track.

With his arm around Shinjou from the side, he watched the city and sighed.

"The thing is..."

"Yes?"

"I was realizing that I want to ensure future generation know about someone as VHS as you."

"...Calm down."

"Heh heh. I cannot wait, Shinjou-kun!"

"Wait, um, uh, Sayama-kun? Are you even listening to me?"

"Yes, I am. When we get back, I will film you, play it back on a triple monitor setup, and enjoy comparing it to the real one! Yes, I will have two high-resolution Shinjou-kuns! We must return alive today, Shinjou-kun! ...Anyway, what have you been trying to say?"

Since he had his arm around her, she was able to immediately tighten his necktie.

While she strangled and shook him, he thought to himself.

*...Heh heh. She is so cute when she is embarrassed. Now, this*

*is what I call flirting.*

*It is truly wonderful how she sounds so serious when saying “die” or “perish” to hide her embarrassment.*

*Recently, she has not been releasing me even when I tap out, but that is just how she shows that she does not want to let me go. And I seem to have a way of always giving her what she wants.*

*...She is feeling lonely, so she can strangle me as much as she wants!*

Regardless, he started tapping out before long.

He was released, he caught his breath, and he realized she was looking up at him.

He wiped the sweat from his brow after that light exercise and spoke.

“What is it, Shinjou-kun?”

“Well...I was just thinking that this is how things usually go for us.”

“Kazami and Izumo seemed a little different from normal.”

Shinjou looked up to the ceiling and thought a bit, but she finally smiled.

“I’m sure they’ll be back to normal when they get to Mitaka.”

“Will they?”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “Even though it’s Christmas. ...Look.”

The train started to slow. Shinjou glanced around, but Sayama kept his arm around her and refused to let go.

She did not resist and simply looked out the window.

“The station area is all decorated. There’s even a Christmas tree. But...” She smiled bitterly. “Why are we the same as always in the middle of this big festival?”



“That is simple, Shinjou-kun. We are always having a festival.”

“...‘We’?”

He nodded and her expression vanished.

She hung her head and he held her even tighter.

“What put you in a bad mood so quickly?”

“Well...I was just thinking that this is how things usually go for us.”

“Of course it is,” he said. “We are those who enjoy festivals. If enjoying something is better than suffering through it – and you do not wish to be a masochist – then it is best to think of everything as a festival.”

Sayama looked to the decorations outside the station they were stopped at.

“Look.” He shook Shinjou’s shoulder to get her to look too. “The Christmas tree is so pretty, Shinjou-kun. We should have gotten one for ourselves.”

“Wouldn’t our room feel pretty cramped?”

“But it would feel even more fun. Have you ever-...?”

She shook her head before he could finish his question.

“I don’t think I’ve ever decorated a tree. Although maybe I just don’t remember it.”

“Then how about doing it with me?”

She gave him a troubled smile, but...

“Sayama-kun, you’ll be with me for all my firsts, won’t you?”

As if in response to that thought, she relaxed her shoulders and nodded.

“That’s right, Sayama-kun. ...A Christmas tree would be nice.

I hope we can get a really big one. And..."

"And?"

"Well." Her expression softened. "I hope everyone, even my mom and the others, can see that tree. ...I kind of feel like they'll be able to."

•

"A Christmas tree? What's that? You want to go see it?"

A surprised voice came from the floor.

That was where a black cat sat on the wooden floor of a large, dimly-lit space.

Several rectangular sun-marks covered the stepped floor the cat sat on, but those were the marks left when bookcases were moved.

This had originally been a library, but all of the bookcases had been moved to the hallway, leaving a few desks and...

"Then quit clinging to the counter and get going, Brunhild. I want to see that Christmas tree, too."

The small figure at the counter looked back toward the cat.

The person reading a book and sipping at a paper cup of coffee was Brunhild.

The cat then heard what she said while wearing her black clothing and hat.

"You know?" she began. "Only children get excited about a Christmas tree. It's not worth going somewhere crowded for."

"Hm. So you don't have any friends to go with you?"

Brunhild crushed the paper cup in her hand.

She glared at him, so he took a step back.

"Did I...say something wrong?"

“...No, not really.”

“A-are you sure?”

The cat forced himself to start whistling.

During the intermittent whistling, Brunhild’s gaze slowly returned to the book.

After a while, the cat stopped whistling and seemed unable to stand the subsequent silence.

“Where’s Siegfried?”

“He apparently went to Okutama. He said it was to see if Hiba’s grandfather had kicked the bucket yet.”

“Hm. Everyone’s ignoring you, aren’t they?”

Brunhild suddenly pulled a coffee grinder from below the counter.

The old, hand-cranked device was heavy enough to make the entire counter shake.

“U-um...”

The coffee grinder blocked the cat’s view of Brunhild’s face.

She placed beans inside, grabbed the handle in her fists, and started cranking away.

Sounds of scraping and crunching filled the library as Brunhild seemed to enter a trancelike state.

“Heh heh heh heh heh. Destruction is simply wonderful!!”

“C-calm down. Let’s calm down, Brunhild! Something unpleasant might have happened, but calm down!”

“Then,” she said while coming to a stop.

After a short pause, she continued speaking while holding the handle like she was praying.

“Why didn’t Siegfried give me a Christmas present?”

“Well...”

She immediately interrupted.

“Wrong! You have one more chance!”

“I-I hadn’t even said anything yet!!”

“What? You sure are slow.”

“Y-you’re a tyrant! An absolute tyrant!”

She expressionlessly told him to “just get on with it” and sweat began pouring down his face.

He desperately thought for about five seconds.

“Oh! I know!”

“...Yes?”

He responded to her quiet question by stretching out his body and puffing out his chest.

“Just think about it! People only give presents to children and given your actual age-Wait! I was wrong! Forget I said anything! Please!”

“...You’ve gotten clever in the worst possible way lately.”

“By the way.” The cat prepared his hind legs to make a quick escape as he asked. “Why do you want a present in the first place?”

“Because...I feel like he would have given Gutrune one.”

“Hm? So you want him to treat you like a child?”

One second after asking, he ducked down and covered his head, but Brunhild did not send an attack his way.

“...?”

Confused, he looked up and found her with her chin resting on the coffee grinder.

Her partially-opened eyes were looking right at him.



“Maybe I do.”

“...Do what?”

“The thing is,” she began. “I lost my parents when I was a kid and didn’t have an enjoyable childhood. My time with the princess and the others was fine, but ever since losing 1st-Gear, there hasn’t been any love around me.”

“Ha ha ha. You’re placing responsibility for your own personality on others, aren’t you?”

“Heh heh heh. You’re placing your own life in someone else’s hands, aren’t you!?”

The cat quickly retreated, but Brunhild only snorted.

The cat saw her lean back in her chair, cross her arms behind her head, and sigh toward the ceiling.

“This really is boring...”

“Th-then, Brunhild.”

The cat made a suggestion.

“How about I give you a present?”

“...Such as?”

There was a tone of interest in her question, so the cat started thinking.

“Um...”

*This has to be something really good, so...*

“How about the corpses of a dozen cicadas I caught during the summer? You can use them in a ritual, can’t you?”

“Do you think I’m a witch or something?”

“Y-you clearly are!!”

Hearing that, she looked at the hat on her head.

“Maybe so,” she said as she lifted it up and let a small bird

poke its head out.

She straightened up and rested her chin on the coffee grinder again.

“Well, something would be better than nothing. Okay, if you’re going to get me something...”

A smile appeared on her face as she looked down at him.

“Listen. There’s something I want.”

“Eh? Wh-what? What is it!? A victim!? Or a sacrifice!? If you get one of those, I can avoid getting tied up, can’t I!? ...So which is it!?”

“Are you picking a fight with me!? ...Listen.”

She pointed at him and jabbed her finger forward with each word.

“I. Want. Your. Remorse.”

“...My remorse?”

The cat tilted his head.

After tilting it for five seconds, twenty seconds, and then a full minute, he slowly lowered his hips.

“What exactly...do you mean?”

“...Oh? You show it all the time. After I scold you.”

“So my remorse...is collapsing limply to the floor?”

“If that’s what your remorse is, then yes! Now, give me your remorse for my present!”

She stood up and approached, so the cat made a run for it.

•

“A present, hm?”

A male voice could be heard on a sunny street corner.

A man in a somewhat worn-out lab coat stood in front of a house on a narrow road. The house's nameplate said "Kashima", the man had a leather bag in his right hand, and he adjusted his glasses and collar with his left hand.

"Now, then."

He calmed his breathing and started to open the door.

That was when the wooden door suddenly opened from inside.

Sandal-wearing footsteps and a woman's voice reached him from the rectangle of darkness.

"Welcome home, Akio-san."

A woman with short black hair stepped out with her eyes bent and narrowed.

"It's good to be back, Natsu-san. I-..."

He trailed off because Natsu was holding a baby to her chest when she stepped out.

The baby was wrapped in a white cloth while she looked to her mother and father and spoke to both of them.

The quiet "ah" caused Kashima to narrow his own eyes.

"Daddy's home, Harumi."

He breathed a small sigh of relief.

Natsu must have seen the tension leave his shoulders because she nodded.

"I'm glad you're all right."

A note of relief filled her voice.





During the early morning two days before, his workplace had been destroyed in an “earthquake” and everyone inside – him included – had evacuated thanks to the early warning they had received.

However, relatives like Natsu had only been informed the following day and the evacuated people had been missing at that point.

She had apparently been incredibly worried until he had contacted her at about ten. When he had called then, she had apparently been about to visit his parents and she had burst into tears as soon as she heard his voice.

Then a horribly unreasonable hour of scolding and kindness had followed.

However, he had needed to take care of some things afterwards, so he had not come home until now.

It had been a while, but he was returning home just like always.

It looked like Natsu had calmed down by now, but she was still relieved to actually see him with her own eyes. That may have been why her left hand was tugging on his lab coat.

“Please call me sooner next time. ...I don’t want to hear whether you’re okay or not from someone else.”

*Who’s supposed to contact her if I died?* he wondered, but he decided it would be best not to say that given the circumstances. So...

“I’ll always return home as long as you’re protecting our home ...Isn’t that right, Harumi?”

He tried to touch his daughter, but Natsu turned around to move Harumi away from him.

A quiet “ah” escaped him and she looked over her shoulder at

him and laughed quietly from her throat.

“The naughty Santa who waited until Christmas morning to come home doesn’t get to touch Haru-chan.”

*Now that’s a harsh punishment*, he thought in silent shock, but he did not apologize. After all, his late return had been due to work he needed to do last night and the two of them had decided he would not apologize for any work that protected his family.

So instead, he spoke in an intentionally playful voice.

“To show my remorse, I changed from red to white clothes.”

He shrugged and Natsu tilted her head while still smiling.

“What is it?” he asked when faced with her confusion.

“Did putting on white clothes also white-out your memories of the present you mentioned on the phone?”

His body temperature dropped by three degrees.

He had indeed mentioned a present he had bought when speaking with her before the “earthquake”. It had been an IAI Christmas Mystery Bag. Specifically the “Pine” one that cost thirty thousand yen. He had used an X-ray device and an MRI to check the contents, then used a conceptual scan, and finally gotten the bomb squad to open it. After tossing all the dangerous items in Atsuta’s locker, he had repackaged it with what he had bought himself to create what he called the True Mystery Bag.

“It’s not that I forgot. It was lost in the earthquake.”

“Haru-chan? Our Santa didn’t forget our present. He lost it. And in an earthquake no less. Sounds like a magician from an RPG, doesn’t it? ...He destroys, but he can’t create.”

Kashima’s body temperature dropped even further as Natsu rubbed her cheek against Harumi and laughed again.

“Sorry, Akio-san. Since you were safe, I decided to get back at you for all the worrying you put me through.”

When she put it that way, he could only accept it. It did not seem fair, but he decided she was making sure he did not need to apologize for making her worry.

However, there was some darkness remaining on her face. He knew why and, even though he did not say anything, she put it to words without hiding anything.

“Akio-san, you have work tonight too, don’t you?”

“I’ll be back,” he replied.

He had already told her over the phone that he needed to prepare for work at the Kanda branch next year since the main building had been destroyed.

That was a lie.

He had “work” in the city tonight. And this work required him to become a soldier even though he had an important office position. It was possible he could lose his life and it was even possible the world could be destroyed.

*...But...*

“I’ll definitely be back.”

He said the same words he had once said in his heart.

Natsu turned back around to face him. There was no smile in her eyes, her mouth opened, and she trembled a little, but...

“Okay.”

She forced a smile and nodded. That motion caused something to spill from the corners of her eyes.

She must have noticed the tremor in her eyes because she wiped at the top of her cheeks with her fingers and turned her back. She quickly moved inside the house and put on a cheerful



voice.

“A-Akio-san...will you be leaving right away?”

“I think I can wait until this evening. I’m sure Atsuta at least will be late.”

“In that case...”

Some of the strength truly had returned to her voice now and she asked a question while removing her sandals in front of him.

“It may be midday, but how about we have a party here while thanking Atsuta-san for always being late?”

“A party?”

“Yes.” She turned around and showed him a real smile. “This will be Haru-chan’s first Christmas after all. So can’t we?”

By the time she asked that, a trouble look had reached her face. Her cheeks were flushed, but that was probably from embarrassment. When he thought about it, they had always celebrated Christmas by eating out before Harumi had been born and her family had no real Christmas traditions since her parents had followed strict Japanese customs.

*A party a child would enjoy must be an adventure for her, he realized. So...*

“Good idea.”

The expression on her face when she heard that made it hard to tell whether she or Harumi was the child.

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and stepped inside. *I’m home*, he said in his heart.

“Well, I’ll bring you a present tomorrow. Santa hit someone with his sleigh today, so he’ll be a little late. But...Natsu-san, you already have the party ready to go, don’t you? The food’s all cooked, isn’t it?”

“Eh? W-well... How did you know?”

She sounded troubled and he squeezed her shoulder in lieu of an answer.

He brought his cheek in close.

“Ah,” she said while shrinking back and looking him in the eye, so he looked right back.

Her eyes were a little damp from crying a bit earlier.

Those black eyes closed and her chin turned upwards.

He nodded as she gave a small demanding wave of her head.

“You asked how I knew you had the food for the party cooked.”

“?”

“That’s because I could smell vanilla essence on you.”

She blushed. Harumi also moved at her chest, so she might have been worried about how she smelled too.

But Natsu closed her eyes and spoke in a somewhat displeased voice.

“Th-that is, um...my smell.”

“Is it? You smell this sweet?”

“Yes.” She waved her head again with her eyes still closed. “It has a flavor too, but it’s bitter, not sweet. I learned that today.”

She laughed from her throat and Kashima brought that laugh into his mouth. With that, he began their party for this holy day.

•

“A party, huh?”

The sun shined on some white trucks at a parking lot in the mountains.

That sunny mountaintop parking area was in Yamanashi.

There were twelve giant white trucks in the large parking lot and they were arranged in three rows of four.

A couple of people could be seen on the roof of the central truck.

A blonde maid sat in the center with a woman in a lab coat resting her head on her lap.

The woman stared up into the sky.

"A party..." she muttered again.

The maid whose lap she was resting her head on tilted her head.

"Will you be dancing? We can reduce the strain on your body, Lady Miyako."

"Hmm." The woman named Miyako brought a hand to her forehead in thought. "The thing is, Moira 1st."

"Yes, sir. What is it?"

"Think about it. You've seen my mom, right? Our Christmas traditions were pretty half-assed."

"Half...assed?"

*I am not used to that adjective,* thought Moira 1st.

Miyako gave a deep nod at her own word and said more.

"We would celebrate it, but we'd eat sushi and take a yuzu bath. ...I don't remember ever having a cake."

"I see." Moira 1st nodded while thinking that cooking would be an easy task. "Then let us make one, Lady Miyako. Before we leave for Tokyo."

"Eh? You can do that?"

Miyako looked up at her and Moira 1st nodded back with a

smile.

“Yes, sir. One of these trucks is your own personal kitchen. We can make ancient or modern Japanese, Western, or Chinese food. In fact, we could even make some dubious African cuisine. All of the ingredients are fresh, so they only need to be prepared with 3rd’s techniques.”

“If any of that’s alive, let it go. No, wait. You’re not supposed to release non-native species. Well, whatever. ...More importantly, isn’t that a waste of money when we aren’t even spending half a day on the road?”

“3rd-Gear’s future is dependent on your health.”

Moira 1st smiled and spoke so Miyako could hear.

“I have determined it is an excellent deal to only need a single truck to manage all of the food for the person supporting 3rd-Gear. Besides, if my management has been perfect, your body weight should not have changed more than 100g since summer.”

“Eh?” asked Miyako as she reached for her stomach.

After a while, she looked up in surprise while rubbing her belly.

“Come to think of it, you’re right! I never step on the scale, so I’d have never noticed!”

“U-um, Lady Miyako? I feel like a young woman should try to manage her own health at least somewhat...”

“But those scales can’t measure out the grams for experimental materials. Why would I use something like that?”

“Oh, is that so?”

*Is that how it works?* wondered Moira 1st with a tilt of the head.

Miyako smiled and said more.

“But are you sure I should eat a cake? I might gain weight? I’m not used to eating them.”

“Not to worry. We will calculate out all of the carbohydrates and fiber to make an accurate yet slightly altered cake.”

“Altered?”

“Yes, sir.” Moira 1st nodded with a serious expression. “3rd’s techniques are capable of making a perfect reproduction of a cake, but then the taste would never change. That is why we add in just a little bit of fuzziness. For example, when measuring the ingredients, we will ask the old lady from the house out back to do it or we will use an analog clock with a nearly dead battery to measure the cooking time. And with that added thrill, we will make...”

She clenched her right fist with the serious expression intact.

“A mayonnaise cream cake since you love mayonnaise so much!!”

“Wait a minute. I’m not familiar with that cooking process, but what kind of flavor is that?”

“Eh? I-it is mostly mayonnaise cream, the sponge cake will have a lot of the sweetness removed, and fruit seemed like it would be a poor flavor match, so we will use fresh cucumber and lettuce.”

“You know what? That’s called a mayonnaise sandwich. And wouldn’t it be a little rich?”

Moira 1st started to think. She held a vote with the others over their shared memory, they chatted a bit, they scheduled the day’s TV broadcasts to be recorded, and they discussed whether they should triple record “It’s Christmas Mito Kimon 2005” since Miyako liked the show. After sorting through everyone’s opinions, Moira 1st summed them all up for a final decision.

She let out some excess heat with a sigh and then she smiled.

She wiped the artificial sweat from her brow and opened her mouth to state her conclusion.

“In other words, you want to eat a sandwich on Christmas, don’t you!?”

“Stop thinking about mayonnaise. And about cakes. Making a tart would probably be safer.”

“I see.”

Moira 1st nodded just as a blonde girl climbed up onto the edge of the truck.

Sensing the smiling figure, Miyako turned toward her.

“Moira 3rd?”

“Yes.”

After climbing up, the girl dove toward Miyako to lie next to her.

“Stop that.”

Moira 1st frowned, but Moira 3rd did not care. She used her spread hands to slap at the truck’s roof.

“Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, Miyako! Presents!!”

“Presents?” asked Miyako with a chocolate cigarette in her mouth.

“Yeah,” said Moira 3rd as she rested her head in her hands. “We’ll be giving you one, so you give us one too! Please, please, please!”

“Moira 3rd?” cut in Moira 1st. “Lady Miyako is still a low-paid part-time worker, so asking her for too much will wear down 3rd’s finances.”

“My wallet is supporting an entire world?”

Miyako stared into the distance from Moira 1st's lap, but...

"Well, whatever."

She turned toward Moira 3rd without getting up from the other maid's lap and she crossed her arms.

"What do you want, Moira 3rd?"

"Well..."

The girl spoke with a smile in her voice.

"Your first time on Christmas!!"

"————"

Moira 1st's artificial senses detected an iciness in the surrounding air.

Her sight devices also detected a cold sweat pouring down Miyako's face, but after a while Miyako replied in a shaky voice.

"U-um? Moira 3rd? That doesn't refer to a normal Christmas celebration..."

"I know! It's something important, isn't it!? I read a magazine filled with naked women they were selling in that store over there, and it said something about giving that to someone! ... It's a present, isn't it!?"

Moira 1st froze up in thought as she tried to decide whether to stop her or not, but then her younger sister said even more.

"And when Gyes heard me talking about it, she hit me a bunch and explained that – and I quote – 'th-that refers to something incredibly important'!"

Only then did Moira 3rd seem to realize that everyone else had fallen silent.

"Huh?" She tilted her head. "Can you not give me that, Miyako? Do you not have a 'first time'!?"

“W-well, it’s more that...um...I’m all out.”

“Ehhhhh!?! Th-then who did you give it to?”

“Well, Apol-... Hey, why are all of you listening in!?”

As soon as Miyako blushed and shouted, footsteps scurried away from behind the truck. The shouting voices all came from maid dolls.

At the same time, someone else arrived on top of the truck. The woman had a red suit and an equally red face.

“Oh, it’s Gyes! Eh? Ah, hey! Where are you dragging me by the collar? Waaaahhh!!”

“Sorry!!”

Gyes bowed with a complicated look on her face before leaping into the distant forest with Moira 3rd in tow.

“Ah! Gyes! What are you doing!? You need to treat me more like a first time than this!! More like a first time!!”

“Do not say things people will take the wrong way!!”

Metallic sounds of impact rang from the forest and Moira 1st sighed.

But in her lap, Miyako covered her face in her hands and tried to keep from laughing.

“She sure is dumb...”

“Yes, sir. I apologize for my unfortunate sister.”

“It’s fine. No one’s more unfortunate than me. So do what you can to support me.”

She sighed and rolled onto her back, but she still had a hand on her face to cover her eyes.

“Hey,” she said to Moira 1st. “I’ll think of a present for all of you later. And as for what I want, well...”



“Yes, sir?”

“I want everyone to make it back safely tonight.”

Moira 1st directed her auditory devices’ input into her shared memory as Miyako continued.

“If we don’t do that, everything will derail like it did ten years ago.”

“...Yes, sir.”

At that point, a maid with short blonde hair climbed up onto the truck.

It was Moira 1st’s other younger sister, Moira 2nd. The glasses-wearing maid named Violet was with her. They had apparently finished servicing the gods of war and weapons inside the trucks. They gave a gesture saying everything was ready to go.

They were in Yamanashi, so they could reach Tokyo by evening if they left now.

However, Moira 1st suggested to the others that they wait a bit to leave. At least until Miyako stopped covering her face with her hand.

Everyone of course replied with “yes, sir”, and Miyako spoke up even though she could not hear any of that.

“Yeah...”

She raised her right foot and dropped the sandal’s heel down onto the truck’s roof.

A dull sound accompanied her next words.

“Let’s all come back.”

But the roof did not give a response.

Moira 1st knew that the god of war inside this truck was blue.

“It will be okay, Lady Miyako.”

Moira 1st gently brushed her master's hair.

"We will all come back."

She nodded and hoped Miyako would cheer up.

"After all, we all need to eat your special mayonnaise tart."

"Nooooo!!"

*Eh?* thought Moira 1st as Miyako raised her hands in resignation and took in a deep breath.

"Please just make a normal cake!!"

•

"Cake. E."

"E." "... "Elves."

"S, so...strangulation."

"N." "... "Nab."

"B, so...bully."

"..." "Y." "Year."

"R, so...rape."

"..." "Your words" "seem a little" "harsh."

"Harsh? But Sayama and the others often use and say them. Like Shinjou."

"Shinjou?"

"Shinjou does to Sayama. First, strangulation."

"Strangulation." "Neck." "Pressure." "Asphyxiation."  
"Execution."

"Proof that they get along."

"Friends?" "Nice?" "Friendly?" "Strangulation?" "Execution?"

"Sometimes uses knee. Uses midair flying knee."

“...Friends?”

“Yes.”

“Understood.” “Trust you.” “Incomprehensible culture.”  
“But.” “Respect.” “Shinjou.”

“Shinjou said stop bullying. Said was mental rape.”

“Understand.” “Comprehend.” “Similar.” “Resembles.”  
“Appare Tono-sama.”

“Similar? Similar? Usual joke?”

“Good.” “Is good.” “Gooder.” “That is wrong.” “Then bad?”

“D, so...desserts.”

“What is that?”

“Sayama says everyone gets ‘just desserts’ based on flags.”

“S?”

“S.”

“S.” “...” “Sweets.”

•

“A Christmas cake? Why are you bringing up sweets?”

A suspicious voice filled a small apartment.

The nine square meter room was lit by the midday sunlight coming in through the window as the room was being cleaned.

A single person stood in the center of the room. It was a dark-skinned boy in a leather jacket.

His gaze was directed downward toward the room’s closet and its closed bottom shelf.

“Why do you want to eat a cake and gain weight, Heo Thunderson?”

“I-I didn’t say that, Harakawa.”

Heo's voice came from the closet's sliding door.

Something was moving inside the closet, so the door would sometimes shake a bit as if something were pushing against it.

"It's just...you have to have a cake on Christmas."

"I see." Harakawa nodded. "A nice creative statement. By which I mean it will be creating additional weight for you."

"Wh-why do you have to look at everything in a negative light!?"

Harakawa listened as the closet door defended the cake idea.

"C-cakes are delicious! ...And deliciousness is justice! I always take the side of justice, so I'll protect everything delicious!"

"Fine, but make sure all you do is protect it. That should solve everything. I'm sure the cake's descendants will prosper. And by descendants, I mean mold."

The closet door fell silent at that, but after a while...

"Can I take back what I said and become a hunter?"

"You certainly abandoned the side of justice quickly. So what are you going to do? Take the side of evil and become a destroyer of all things delicious by adopting a thorough scorched-earth policy?"

"I-I can't destroy cakes! Cakes are meant to be eaten."

*I don't see how that's any different,* thought Harakawa.

"It doesn't matter, but hurry it up, Heo Thunderson. I'm ready to go already."

"Eh? Th-that was fast."

"No, you're just slow. The Yokota group will have already left."

Everyone was on the move. Some were arriving from western Tokyo and others from Yamanashi, but they would all check in

at the Mitaka Station base before scattering around Tokyo.

Harakawa and the others were supposed to gather at Mitaka as well.

And Harakawa felt a need to arrive there before any of the others.

*...If we don't, who knows what kind of rumors they'll start in order to pass the time.*

He could easily imagine what Sayama, Shinjou, Kazami, and Izumo would say if they were late.

"Ha ha ha. Harakawa must be late because he is flirting with Heo-kun again, the pedo bastard."

"D-don't call him a pedo. That's not nice to him or Heo. At least call him a lolicon bastard instead."

"That's the same thing. But you second years sure have interesting tastes..."

"Yeah, but personally, I have to wonder if Heo will turn out to be quite the Holstein in the future."

"Ryuuji-kun, what is a Holstein?"

"Ha ha ha. Mikage-san, she would never be able to hold a candle to you. The trick is to have a nicely balanced size."

Hiba and Mikage unexpectedly yet naturally joined the imaginary conversation, but it did not seem out of place. That made Harakawa shudder and he felt an unpleasant sweat on his back.

*...This isn't good.*

If they were delayed any further, he was certain exactly that situation would play out and the entire group would decide their delusions were factual.

They would all be looking at him as a pedo hoping for a

Holstein.

Plus, the comments would activate Heo's right brain, she would say something strange, and his peaceful life would be enveloped in destructive flames.

*...Oh, no.*

Just as he thought that, the closet door spoke.

"U-um, Harakawa? Why are you being so quiet?"

After asking that, she seemed to realize something.

"Ah! D-don't tell something happened to your brain!?"

"Shut up and come on out."

"Eh?"

The closet door sounded surprised and continued more hesitantly.

"B-but, Harakawa, I'm still naked. N-no, a-are you that...that interested in seeing me the way I was born!?"

"If I was interested in fetuses, maybe I could understand what goes in you people's brains."

"Oh, come on, Harakawa. Don't be like that."

"Hurry up and put some clothes on!!"

"O-okay," replied the door.

A moment later, he heard a dull sound as something moved inside the closet.

Something had slammed into the shelf above from below.

"Hh."

Heo cried out in pain, rolled to the right, and crashed into the right wall.

"Eek."

She rolled back the other way and hit what sounded like the bookshelf.

“O-ow! Why now!?”

She quickly tried to sit back up and hit the shelf above once more.

Harakawa heard a dull sound, something falling over, and then ten seconds of silence.

“...Heo?”

He called out to her, tilted his head, and found this strange.

“Are you done playing around?”

“Playing around!? This isn’t a game! I was serious!”

“You were seriously running into things? Then I’m sorry I interrupted. I’m leaving.”

He turned his back on the closet.

*...This is hopeless. I’ll be here all day if I play along. She can get to Mitaka by train, but I need to go on ahead for my own safety.*

But...

“Ah, p-please wait!”

Heo opened the closet door and rushed out with her bag.

When he saw the tears in her eyes and the sports bag, he realized he may have gone a little too far, but at the same time...

“...Where are your clothes?”

“Eh?”

She looked down and realized she was naked.

“—————!”

She blushed, threw the bag aside, and quickly dove back

behind the closet door.

He heard her quickly rummaging around inside the storage box in the back of the closet.

“Y-you’re mean and perverted, Harakawa! You tricked me into coming out naked!”

“That’s an incredible accusation there. Personally, I think it has more to do with you losing all common sense as a human being.”

“I-it doesn’t matter!” she shouted back as he heard the rustling of cloth.

He then heard her opening another box, but then...

“Ah.”

After her voice of realization, all of the sounds came to a sudden stop.

Harakawa was not sure what was going on.

“U-um, Harakawa? This is...a little hard to admit, but...I-I think all of my clothes are in that bag.”

He shoved the bag into the closet and heard a scream as it was swallowed up by the darkness.

He immediately heard it being opened and rummaged through.

“U-um, oh, this...and this...goes on the bottom...no, this is goes on top...top, top, bottom, bottom...”

“Heo Thunderson, I think you’re missing something right now.”

“Wh-what is that? ...There we go.”

“Are you dressed?”

“Yes,” she said in delight. “I just finished putting on my T-shirt!”



*How slow can you be?* he wondered but left unsaid. She was incredibly fast when it came to running or derailing conversations in strange directions, but she was slower than average in everything else. If he said anything here, there were decent odds she would come out in only her T-shirt.

And what would everyone say then?

“Oh, dear. Heo, why are you sporting the naked T-shirt look? I don’t remember teaching you about that contradictory genre.”

“Roger! Roger! What is the naked T-shirt look!?”

“Testament. I believe it is a variation on the ancient Japanese tradition of Kanpu Masatsu. You wear unnecessarily light clothing when it is cold to train your mind and you use trade friction to achieve complete victory. It is a magical tradition for international relations. Some take it to another level by sitting below a waterfall.”

“I see, I see. What a frightening country Japan is to find a magical resolution to their international issues!”

After imagining that much, Harakawa grew truly worried about his future.

But before long...

“Okay, all done! I’m dressed!”

Delighted that she had dressed herself on her own, Heo left the closet.

When she stepped out into the light, she raised her arms a little and spun around once to show off the clothes.

“W-well? Did I put them on right? ...Does anything look wrong?”

“Well...” Harakawa slowly opened his mouth as he quietly looked at Heo’s clothing. “Why are you wearing a track suit? And why is it a hand-me-down from my mom?”

Heo looked down at the reddish-brown track suit with worn-out white lines along the sides.

“I-is there anything wrong with it?”

“...Where are your own clothes?”

“In the bag.”

“All of them? In that small bag?”

He saw her nod and then she responded as if it were perfectly normal.

“I only have two sets of clothes.”

“Are you a character from a kids manga? ...What happened to the money I gave you?”

“That all went to toward shoes and bike shorts for the track team.”

He mentally hung his head.

*...Dammit.*

He physically hung his head as well before placing his hands on her shoulders.

“This was my fault. It really was...”

“Wh-what was? Why are you giving me a look of pity!?” She clasped her hands together. “I-I have enough to get by in my school life and the landlady said she would give me some of her clothes from when she was young, s-so I’m doing just fine.”

In his heart, Harakawa honestly apologized to Heo’s parents who he could never meet.

“I was too careless and it’s made you live like a poor person...”

“I-I am not poor. What about me makes you say that!”

“How about...all of you?”

“Eh? Eh?”

She grew flustered and he sighed.

He thought about the contents of his wallet and then noticed she was barefoot.

“...Let’s go. There’s got to be a cheap clothing store around here somewhere.”

“Eh? Wh-why?”

“If you show up in that red track suit, it’ll cause nothing but unfortunate rumors.”

For a moment, she only stared at him, unsure what to say, but eventually...

“H-Harakawa! I-if you add on an extra expense like this, we won’t have anything to eat and we’ll be a living version of the Dialogue on Poverty! Oh, b-but if that happens, I’ll earn us some money! I’ll help work to support us!”

“What is the state of our finances in your mind? No, never mind.”

Harakawa grabbed Heo’s bag.

“Buy everything you need with less than ten thousand yen. Including a coat. You’ll be changing into your armored uniform when we arrive, but we’ll be taking the motorcycle. You need something warm to wear.”

Heo suddenly embraced him from behind.

“...!?”

He gasped in confusion and heard her ask a question while clinging to him.

“Is this your Christmas present to me!?”

“...No. This is the bare minimum of what you need to be a civilized human being, so I can’t let this count as a Christmas

present.”

“I don’t mind!”

*You should*, thought Harakawa while also feeling depressed that he could not deny how poor they were.

But Heo said more while pressing her cheek against his back.

“Heh heh. I’m feeling lucky today. My lucky word is destitute! My lucky color is reddish-brown! I hear American UCAT is having a Christmas present lottery to cheer everyone up, but I’m sure I can win something today! Like a Christmas cake!”

“Win that and you’ll get fat.”

“D-don’t worry. When I win, I’ll share it with everyone.”

*Talk about counting your chickens before they hatch*, silently complained Harakawa.

“But thank you so much for wanting me to look nice, Harakawa. Choosing all my own clothes down to the underwear is a first for me.”

“This is a first for me too, Heo Thunderson. Being so thoroughly misunderstood, that is.”

“Eh?”

Harakawa reached a hand behind his back and tousled her hair.

“Well, as long as your brain is happy, Heo Thunderson. This is far better than the night before last, so try to always keep the following mindset.”

He took a breath.

“This will be a happy night no matter what happens.”

•

“Where do you think my happiness is?”

A sleepy boy spoke at a table.

He rested his tired face on a table in the back of an underground dining hall with “US UCAT Yokota Base” written on the white wall.

A foreign man in glasses looked his way.

“Hiba, to be honest, I feel like the two of us live in similar circumstances.”

“R-really, Roger-san!? You’re just as unnaturally unlucky as I am!?”

Hiba perked up and Roger pushed his glasses up his nose.

“Well, not as much as you,” said the man quietly.

“Th-then that’s no good at all! You’re just pretending to understand me! Oh, I just wish I could distance myself from the world like some kids these days!”

“I believe the world is already keeping its distance from you whether you like it or not.”

“Wh-what are you talking about!? Unlike my upperclassmen, I’m a pretty normal person!”

*Then you’re aware how close you are to being an abnormal person?* wondered Roger.

After all, the main force of Team Leviathan was made up of inhuman people with carnal thought processes who were constantly intoxicated on the trippy narcotics produced in their own brains. But the truly frightening part was how none of them were aware of it.

The truly insane were always insane to the core, so...

*...They have no idea how crazy they are.*

For that reason, they were convinced they were as normal as the people around them.

Hiba had called himself a “pretty normal person”, but he was using the worst possible examples to compare himself to.

Your average crazy had no chance in the face of Team Leviathan.

Roger was impressed that Hiba could call himself only “pretty normal” when compared to them, but he also decided to keep his distance.

“Um, Roger-san? What are you sitting there thinking about?”

“My apologies. I was thinking about how best to protect myself.”

“Hm... I’m not sure what you mean, but it must be tough.”

After the immediate threat commiserated with him, Roger decided to change the subject.

“Where is your partner?”

“Oh, Mikage-san’s asleep. She didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Really?”

“She apparently can’t sleep well without her usual pillow.”

Roger guessed the “apparently” was because they had been in different rooms. Mikage would have been using the empty room for a female officer located next to the medical room while Hiba would have been on the top bunk of a room for six male personnel. And before he had gone to sleep, his roommates had said the following to him: “Hey, boy. We have three things to tell you before lights out.”

“Eh? But I brushed my teeth and did my homework.”

“No, no, no. Not that. First, this room is for bachelors. Second, we have all of our equipment so we can be deployed at any moment. And that includes night vision goggles.”

“I see...”

“And finally, one of us in here is gay.”

That was when the lights were turned out.

Roger had not checked whether that was a tasteful American joke or not, but he did know Hiba had not gotten a wink of sleep.

Then again, there was another reason Hiba and Mikage had not gotten much sleep.

“We didn’t get to bed until after fixing the destroyed runway...”

Hiba yawned as he lay his head on the table.

“Mixing concrete in the late December chill is hellish work. And I didn’t get to take my bath or shower with Mikage-san.”

“Tes. I do not know about the bath, but you destroyed the runway yourself. That was your own fault.”

Then Roger tilted his head.

“But why didn’t you use Susamikado when repairing the runway?”

“Because if I used Susamikado to mix the concrete, the feedback would make Mikage-san’s hands all rough.”

“It must be tough,” said Roger this time.

Hiba must have been used to hearing that because he smiled without nodding.

“I had her watch since I couldn’t have her help me, but...”

“But?”

Hiba answered Roger’s question with a sleepy nod.

A serious look came to his face and he clenched his fists on the table.

“You see... When Mikage-san was crouching down in her winter gear with the nighttime scenery behind her, she was just so, so, sooo cute! She was wearing so many layers she looked really round! A-and she was holding a can of coffee in both hands! ...Isn’t that great!? Isn’t it!?”

Roger decided not to argue with someone who had bags under his eyes.

*...Calm down. Calm down, Roger. This is what they call a jab. A careless response will drag you into it.*

Perhaps to fight back against his memories of the previous night, Hiba crouched down on top of his chair to mimic Mikage. He grabbed a virtual can between his hands, focused his eyes on the empty air, and said things like “Ryuuji-kun?” or “Isn’t it cold?” And then...

“It’s so wonderful! It’s like...ahh! I can’t express it in words!”

*Please. Please stop trying to demonstrate it with your actions.*

Roger considered getting up from his seat.

The other people in the dining hall were gradually focusing in their direction, so if he did not escape soon, he would be seen as no different from the boy in front of him who was putting on a one-man-play.

*...But...*

He had a feeling that moving put him at risk of being attacked by this sleep-deprived mental beast.

As Roger hesitated, sleepy Hiba opened his eyes wide and hung his head.

“A-and you know what else? Sh-she’ll go like this and shrink down against the wind. She looks a little displeased, but she endures it in silence! It’s so lovely! A-and she did the exact same thing back at November 15, 2003, 4:18:21! And...”



*Oh, thought Roger. It might already be too late.*

Suddenly, a stir ran through the dining hall.

Just as he wondered why, someone stepped out from the corridor.

It was a girl with black hair and white pajamas.

It was Mikage. With slippers on her feet and a pillow under her right arm, she looked around sleepily.

She could not hide the sleepiness in the loosely focused eyes she turned left and right.

“\_\_\_\_\_”

She finally spotted who she was looking for.

She stared at Hiba and Roger’s table for a few seconds and everyone’s gazes gathered on them during that time.

That girl had the strongest god of war not just in Team Leviathan but in the entire world.

Some relief appeared on her slack expression and she walked over. The sound of her slippers was surprisingly steady.

“...Ryuuji-kun.”

“Yes! And you know what else!? When the can was empty, she set it down on the asphalt and spun it like a top for fun! Why is someone like her in this filthy place? It’s full of rotten bachelors with one predatory gay one mixed in. And I know I’m saying some awful things because I’m so sleepy, but there’s no way Mikage-san would really be here. This must be a hallucination!”

“Hallucination?”

“Wow! Even the hallucination’s voice is cute!!”

After celebrating, Hiba mimicked Mikage’s current tone of voice and movements.

“Hallucination?”

Three seconds passed.

“Ah, that didn’t sound anything like her! If only it did, I could enjoy her all on my own!”

Everyone started giving him truly pitying looks, but Roger did not. He knew this boy was capable of much more.

But as the boy gave odd shouts on his own, Mikage grabbed his hand.

She passed her black hair through his fingers, wrapped it around the fingers, and had him tug lightly.

“Hallucination?”

Hiba stared at the hair wrapped around his fingers.

After about twenty seconds, he jumped down from the chair and stood straight up.

“Wow, it’s the real one! I-I’m sorry, Mikage-san! How could I ever mistake the real one for a hallucination!? Even if my hallucinations are really high-def, th-the real deal is still the best! It’s so the best!”

“Why is it the best?”

Roger watched as Hiba sweated profusely at Mikage’s innocent smile and question.

Hiba hesitated for about three seconds.

“W-well...because you’re alive!”

“I see.”

She took the hand her hair was wrapped around and placed it on her forehead.

Then she smiled.

“You can touch me too.”

Roger heard the sounds of weapons being prepared behind

him.

He looked back and even saw someone practicing their tackle with dynamite wrapped around their stomach and someone swapping out their gun's ammunition for armor-piercing rounds.

Regardless, Mikage sat in the seat next to Hiba.

"I can't sleep without you nearby, Ryuuji-kun."

"Y-you can tell if I'm nearby?"

"Nn," she nodded.

Several red dots of laser sights appeared on Hiba's face, but he only shooed them away like mosquitoes. His focus was on Mikage.

"But h-how can you tell? My scent? O-or my charm!? I get it! I'm just overflowing with charm!!"

"Nn. I don't think that's it."

"You're right. It couldn't be that, could it!? Why am I saying something Sayama-san would say!?"

"You get along well."

"Kwaaah! You're horribly mistaken there, but I'll agree to anything you say! That's fine by me! ...But really, how can you tell I'm nearby?"

"Nn," replied Mikage.

But...

"Nnn..."

She may not have known herself, so she glanced up toward the ceiling and searched for the right words.

"Well," she said after a while. "Toshi always notices when you try to peep on me, right? She puts on a headband and charges into the bath with a spear to jab into the wall where you're

peeping.”

“Yes, she attacks from the peephole’s blind spot, so I’ve nearly lost my life a few times there.”

“Nn. But I think I’m starting to reach that level.”

*What level is that?* wondered Roger as Hiba smiled.

“Wow! Then next time I try to peep, I have to go for a long-distance naked-eye zoom or you’ll notice!?”

Roger stayed silent and someone tapped his shoulder from behind.

Before he could turn around, he was passed a small memo.

“Why do people insist on peeping?”

Roger wrote back a reply to that philosophical question.

“I do not want to know.”

If he gave a careless answer, he would end up known as someone who understood that boy.

*But,” he thought.* Does this make me a boring person?

*But,* he also thought. *Boring is enough for me.*

That lifestyle had not steered him wrong yet and god seemed to be testing him lately with all the ridiculous people surrounding him.

If he too was an interesting person, then who would support the world?

...Yes.

He saw himself as the breakwater between the peaceful world and the abnormal world and it reminded him of an event from his childhood. Catherine, a popular girl in their town, had confessed to him and they had dated for three days. But...

“You really are boring, Roger.”

She had then broken up with him. That had felt a lot like what he was currently feeling, but that had been a sad memory. He had prepared a coupon for the suspension bridge he had been planning to take her to on the third day, but he had fed that to the goats and holed up in his room doing jigsaw puzzles for a week.

His younger siblings had tried to cheer him up and he could hear their voices again now.

*That's right! That's right, Roger!*

*Roger! Roger! Being ordinary is important! The world wouldn't work without a ton of people like you! You're like a human gear! Roger! Roger! That made you feel worse!?*

*Kwaaaahh!!*"

"————!!"

He had clenched his fists and made a quick recovery, but he had sworn to never get along with the abnormal.

And the first step to that end was standing up from his seat and facing forward.

"...?"

The two of them were sitting in neighboring seats, leaning against each other, and...

"..."

They were sleeping.

Mikage's cheek was resting on Hiba's shoulder as he leaned a bit back in his seat.

Roger heard them snoring.

"Now, then. Those of us from the second group need to leave for Mitaka in an hour."

He relaxed his shoulders, looked up to the ceiling, and spoke

in an exasperated tone.

“So it is a bit early to fall asleep for the holy night.”

•

“Those two sure were fast asleep.”

Someone spoke in front of a long counter.

The person in front of the school’s dining hall counter was a boy in a leather jacket and jeans with a student council armband on. The green armband said “President – Izumo Kaku”.

He was speaking to a girl working in the cooking area who wore an apron over her uniform.

Her uniform had a nametag that said “Kazami”.

Kazami replied with her back to Izumo and the counter.

“They sure are carefree when the world needs them if it’s going to gather together.”

“Yeah, but this is fine,” said Izumo with a bitter smile.

“They probably got everything sorted out and stuck everything where it needed to go.”

“That sounds somehow dirty coming from you.”

Kazami stopped working to glare over her shoulder, but Izumo did not seem to realize why.

She half sighed before continuing.

“It’s a little frightening how normal everything is around here.”

“Oh! So you want me to comfort you!? That sure was a roundabout way of getting to that!!”

“Die. ...Now, about today’s lunch.”

“Th-that’s even worse than a flat-out rejection!”

Kazami raised the Chinese knife in her hand, so Izumo put up his guard.

“You know?” she began while sighing and lowering her hand.

She began chopping some lettuce which made a nice fibrous sound.

She could hear the light sound of the knife on the cutting board and she felt the tactile feedback in her hand.

“Oh, it gouged into it. This cutting board sure is soft.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard someone call a cutting board ‘soft’ before.”

As soon as Izumo said that, Kazami pulled the knife from the board and it slipped from her hand.

A moment later, she heard a solid sound from behind her.

The entire room had grown quiet, so she slowly looked back.

“...”

The knife had stabbed into the shallow crosspiece running along the counter.

Just below it, Izumo was frozen in place with his back bent to peek out from behind the counter.

She looked to his face two centimeters below the knife.

“Oh, sorry, sorry. ...Why do you look so nervous?”

“Y’know...” he replied while slapping the side of the knife stabbed into the crosspiece. “Are you trying to kill me!?”

“Oh, c’mon. I wasn’t looking that way and I didn’t have any killer intent. ...If you’d died, it would’ve been an accident.”

She waved a hand and gave him a bitter smile, but he glared at her and grabbed the knife.

“Then what’s this knife? Why did it come flying my way?”

"Hmm," she thought.

*...Why did it?*

*What am I supposed to say at times like this?* she wondered.

After a moment, she found the answer, so she opened her mouth.

"Well," she said casually. "Because I'm clumsy."

Izumo nodded, turned around, raised his hands toward everyone in the dining hall, set the tempo for them, and then lowered his hands to get them all to speak at once.

"No!!!! That's not clumsiness!!!! It's carelessness!!!!"

"Oh, come on." She was nearly pushed back, but she held her ground. "Th-this is a common mistake!"

"Eh?"

Everyone but Izumo fell silent.

*...Huh?*

*Did I mess up? More than I thought?*

As those strange phrases entered her heart, she heard whispering voices from the dining hall.

"Apparently that's common for her."

"I've been thinking. Isn't it great being boring?"

"Now that I think about it, was the 'mistake' the fact that she threw the knife or the fact that she didn't hit him with it?"

The voices spread. After all, there were plenty of UCAT members here too since they had nowhere else to go after the "earthquake" two nights before.

A lot of them were staying in the shelter set up in the gym, but they got their food here in the dining hall.

Izumo reacted to all those voices by glancing behind him.



After a bit, he faced her again.

“Isn’t that great, Chisato? It looks like they’ve cleared up some of the misunderstandings about you.”

“That is not ‘great’!”

She decided to defend her case and spread her arms to prove her innocence.

“Th-this mistake is common between Kaku and me. I’ll accidentally knock him off the roof, try to jump over him while he’s asleep and accidentally knee him in the side of the head, sneeze while cleaning his ears and accidentally jab it on in there, or wake him up in the morning by kicking him out of the bed.”

“I just realized I go through a lot on a daily basis.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to think I should probably apologize.”

Kazami pulled the knife from the crosspiece, stood within arm’s reach of Izumo, gently tapped her shoulder with the back of the glistening knife, and put on a slight smile.

“Sorry, okay?”

“Th-that just makes me feel less safe!”

Kazami frowned when everyone in the dining hall nodded in agreement.

“Th-then how am I supposed to apologize?”

“Putting down the knife would be a great start, so how about it?”

She did as she was told and started removing the apron too.

“Wait, Chisato! Leave the apron on!”

“...You’re into some weird things.”

She glared at him and he averted his gaze for some reason.

“N-n-n-n-no, I was just thinking you should continue working is all.”

“Oh? ...And you like that?”

He crossed his arms at her casual question.

“Well...” he groaned. “I guess I might be for it if you’re already doing it, but it isn’t anything I would go out of my way to have you do.”

“...I did not expect you to make a serious analysis of that.”

“Calm down.” He held out his hands to stop her and then spoke up in a refreshing voice. “But either way, we can’t do that here! Right?”

She grabbed knives in each hand, so he took a defensive pose. Everyone behind him took the same pose and began to evacuate.

This was the usual scene, so she sighed in the silence left afterwards.

“Well, just let me focus on my work. If I’m not done in an hour, I can’t bring it with us.”

“Hm? We’re not eating that lunch here?”

“Do you really think everyone’s going to have a proper meal before going to Mitaka?”

After answering his question with a question, she looked down at her hands.

The countertop contained bread with the crust cut off, that crust, some vegetables, and some ham.

“We can have a late lunch with everyone.”

*...Although that’s just an excuse to have us all gather together again.*

Deep down, she felt this might be the last chance for them to

do that, so she wanted to take advantage of this time since she had the chance.

*...I sure am weak.*

That was when she realized Shinjou had not come to the dining hall even though she had supposedly woken up.

She had visited Shinjou and Sayama's dorm room during the morning of this important day, but the two of them had been asleep.

Kazami had said she would be making something in the dining hall and Shinjou had replied with sleepy eyes.

"Okay..."

An extended "nn" had followed.

Shinjou had only panicked about being seen after Kazami had left and closed the door.

Shinjou should have visited the dining hall like usual to fix Sayama's lunch, but she had not done so. Given the time, they might have left for Mitaka already.

*Either Shinjou or Sayama might be trying to be nice, thought Kazami. Maybe they want to give us time to think and some work to distract us from any needless worries.*

*...But even if so...*

"I guess it doesn't matter."

Kazami set back to chopping up the sandwich ingredients.

While she was cutting off the bread crust, she began to wonder if she was making this lunch in a forced attempt to make this like "usual" times.

*...But...*

"You don't make food for eight without a really good reason."

She normally only made enough for herself and Izumo or

enough for four at the most, but now she was making enough for eight.

Just cutting everything up was three or four times the work. And she would need to add an extra 15% for what she ate to stave off her own hunger.

*Oh, no. If I keep swinging this knife around, I'll get all muscular.*

"Kaku, would you mind helping?"

"Eh? Why?"

"To preserve my beauty and your life."

"...That's quite the combination of reasons there."

He apparently had no intention of helping.

*Well, that's the usual too,* she thought with a mental shrug.

*...The world is continuing like usual, everyone is here like usual, and they're all doing everything like usual.*

"Then why am I fighting this unusual battle against eight servings of lunch?"

"Don't stop, Chisato. Stop and we won't get any lunch!"

"You're right," she said as she resumed working.

The work took several times longer than normal. If anyone said it was not any good after all this, she would kick their ass, but she doubted any of those starving people say that.

They would scarf it all down disappointingly fast.

"Honestly..."

Preparing lunch for everyone on her own made her think of something.

"Am I everyone's mother?"

"Yeah, except for one. I'd be the dad."

Izumo said it so casually that her heart skipped a beat.

She kept her back turned so he would not notice.

“Um...”

*I need to change the subject. Maybe about who should be on next year's student council or about tonight.*

*Umm, umm...*

“Hey, Kaku, these sandwiches are a lot of work, so could you at least prepare the meat and bread?”

As soon as she said that, Izumo began doing an impression of her father.

“Wow, mama! We get your special sandwiches today!? Papa's feeling needlessly motivated now!! ...How was that, Chisato!?”

Filled with needless motivation of her own, Kazami threw a knife his way.

“This is a holy day, so be quiet!”

•

“A holy day, huh?”

Shinjou spoke on the station platform.

She was on the western end of Mitaka Station's first platform. A leisure table and some chairs were set up behind her as she stood alone in her armored uniform.

Sayama had left the station to check on the plans for that night.

She was the only one here and it had only taken her a few minutes to set up the table.

“I should have brought a book or something...”

Unsure what to do, she peered out in front of the station.

She could sense the coming battle there.

She could even see fighter jets with folded-up wings on the main road at the center of all the large green military vehicles.

Among it all, she could see people in blue, white, and black armored uniforms, as well as...

“Christmas preparations...”

Everything inside the concept space would have its destruction percentage increased if it was destroyed, which would affect the version outside the concept space, so they were not allowed to remove or damage structures unless it was necessary for combat.

By the time she had arrived and changed into her armored uniform, a young member of American UCAT had been undergoing a summary trial for the crime of property damage. The charge was simple and it had to do with the fried chicken restaurant in front of the station.

*...That Otaky Fried Chicken’s Colonel Otaky was dressed in a Santa outfit, but he stripped the colonel naked.*

The summary trial applied the Code of Hammurabi using a majority vote, so the accused was currently standing naked in front of the restaurant. They had taken pity and allowed him to keep his socks on, but that seemed to make it even more bizarre to Shinjou.

And at the same time...

*...Sayama-kun did something bad again.*

It had happened just as the judgment was made.

He had nonsensically said “I see” before crouching down in front of her.

“Now, then.”

He had touched the lower stomach part of her armored uniform.

“...Eh?”

Before she could react, he had made his next move.

He had removed the front latch on the white part protecting her between the legs.

With a small metallic sound, the flexible white armor usually attached to the front of the left and right hip parts peeled away due to its own weight.

“Eh? Eh?”

She had watched helplessly as the white material seemed sucked in between her legs while pulled by the attachments on the butt side. It had moved like a swing and her hands had been unable to keep up.

*...Eh? Ah, wait!*

Once she had remembered she only wore defensive stockings below there, she had come back to her senses.

“————!!”

She had blushed and quickly closed her knees.

Placing her hands between her legs had been both a good and bad move.

She had managed to cover herself, but the flexible white armor had been hard to grab as it dangled from her butt like a bandage and (more importantly) she could not kick the idiot in front of her.

Speaking of that idiot...

“Now, Shinjou-kun! Will you punish me!?”

After some thought, she had realized she could keep her knees together for a flying knee kick. That had added a new move to her repertoire.

Luckily, everyone had written it off as “the usual” and paid

little attention.

She had wanted to complain that they neither helped her nor said anything to Sayama, but gathering too much attention would have been embarrassing.

*...This really is how things usually go, isn't it?*

The depth of her sighs simply would not decrease.

Still, things were moving around her and time was passing.

She could hear the vehicles moving on the road and the aircraft passing by overhead.

According to the clock in front of the station, it was currently just before two in the afternoon.

They had seven hours until they had to start moving.

*...That's when we'll settle everything.*

She started to say something about that, but...

"..."

She found she could not say anything.

Everyone was doing what they had to do and placing great fulfillment behind themselves.

But...

*...Something still seems lacking.*

But she was not quite sure what. Nothing actually was missing, so she wondered if she was simply spoiled.

"It is true a lot of good things have happened lately."

*I really am spoiled*, she complained with a bitter smile.

*...Who would have thought I could ever think that?*

She felt she and the environment around her really had changed.



Not even a year had passed since that moment in the spring.

This time last year, she had never imagined this would have happened or she would feel like this.

It was all so unexpected.

...*Oh.*

Something like a word filled her heart.

It was like finding something at the bottom of some cold water, but she felt some heat in it.

"I know what this is..."

*It's my emotions,* she thought.

Her emotions had begun to move and had filled her with heat, so...

"Now that I know that heat, I don't want to let them cool back down..."

Before, she had been neither hot nor cold.

And the one who had taught her she held this heat inside was someone who held a biting chill inside.

He could be cold, but in his depths, he never, ever froze over. The current kept moving, it never soaked through and vanished, and it felt like it would drop to the greatest depths if left alone.

They had made it this far together.

"...Did I make a horrible mistake?"

As she muttered those words, she heard a sound.

It was an electronic sound mimicking a music box.

It came from the Christmas decorations at the stores in front of the station. The music would play at set intervals and it seemed two in the afternoon was one of those times.

She could not hear it very well with so many people and vehicles moving around, but it definitely reached her.

It began with Jingle Bells, then a song asking Santa Claus to hurry, and finally...

"A hymn..."

The intro set her heart in motion and that feeling escaped as a voice.

+++

"Silent night, Holy night

"All's asleep, one sole light,

"Just the faithful and holy pair,

"Lovely boy-child with curly hair,

"Sleep in heavenly peace

"Sleep in heavenly peace"

+++

The music ended after the first verse, but her throat trembled as if asking it to continue.

Yes, she thought. *I'm glad I have words.*

The uncertain thing in her heart could not be accurately expressed in writing or song, but if she could use words to inspire similar feelings, she could share this uncertain thing. So...

*...I want to share it.*

"That's right."

She was not someone who simply gained something. Most likely...

*...I want to share what I gain.*

If she lacked something now, it was that.

The more emotions one felt, the more they wanted to share what they had felt. There was no limit to that and that sense of lack was created specifically when one had everything they needed.

It may have been the ultimate form of being spoiled.

But her precious person was a representative for the entire world, so...

“It’s the ultimate form of supply.”

As opposites, they fulfilled the duality of supply and demand.

She smiled at that realization and heard a voice behind her.

“Shinjou-kun.”

It was Sayama’s voice and his footsteps followed.

“The others have arrived. And just when we were going to do some flirting too.”

“Yeah,” she said while holding the platform railing.

The footsteps and voice approached from behind.

It was the usual way of things, but...

...*Surely*...

Surely everyone’s “usual way of things” contained a relationship like this.

They had a reason to feel lacking specifically because they were fulfilled.

And because of that...

“We decide to be with each other in a way that isn’t satisfied with simply being together forever.”

She muttered under her breath and turned around.

The station platform was not in its usual state.

Everyone stood there in armored uniforms.

It was all the usual people.

Kazami and Izumo carried a bucket together.

Hiba and Mikage looked somewhat sleepy.

Heo and Harakawa held a box with fancy wrapping.

All of the others were apparently here too.

And Sayama approached her.

“Now, let us have a late lunch, Shinjou-kun.”

He grabbed his outstretched hand with her own and she took a step toward him.

This was the usual way of things.

It was their precious “usual” that would continue to allow them to gain things and share them with each other.

They had done this in the past, they were doing it now, and they would surely continue to do so in the future.

She faced her precious person in that group she would never grow tired of.

*...I'll always take his hand like this, and...*

She would take a step forward alongside him.

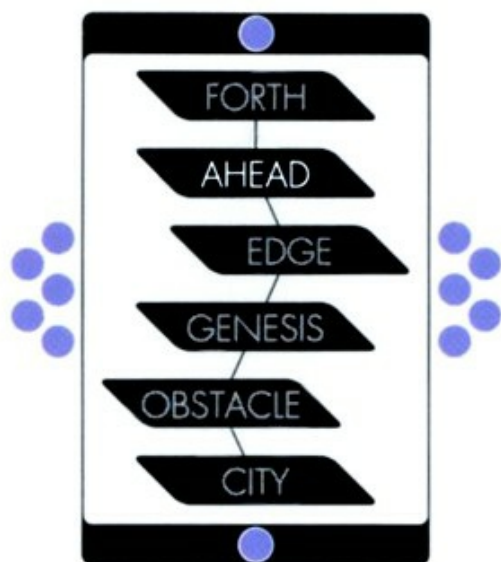
So...

“\_\_\_\_\_”

Shinjou did so now as well.

She hoped that doing so would allow her to share what she felt in her heart.





The 1st.AHEAD